

## Assessing Women's Participation in Nigerian Column Writing

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### Abstract

Journalism is a traditionally male-dominated profession. While women have made steady progress toward breaking their age-long under-representation in other key genres of Nigerian journalism, they remain largely sidelined in column writing. This paper compares the number of female columnists to that of their male counterparts. It also examines the predominant subjects of the listed female columns in order to see if their identified subjects potentially impact on the various agenda-setting and watchdog functions of the column and columnists. The researcher draws on the tenets of the agenda-setting and agenda-building theories of the mass media to establish that women can use the immense power of the column to shape public discourse and empower themselves. A content analysis of all the listed Nigerian columnists shows that the number of male columnists greatly outweighs that of the females. The study also shows that female columns are mainly about relationships and fashion. Therefore, women are urged to take advantage of the column, especially politics and economy columns, to advance the many issues of women's rights as well as influence vital public discourse.

### Keywords

Column writing, print media, columnists, agenda-setting, gender, content analysis

### Introduction

One of the most significant means the print media fulfils the agenda-setting, agenda-building and watchdog roles of the media is through column writing. Newspaper and magazine columns are written by seasoned journalists and non-journalists who are very knowledgeable about the subjects of their respective columns. The column provides a veritable platform for sharing comment and criticism on issues of public importance. In addition, the availability of an avenue for the exchange of comment and criticism empowers the civil society and makes for a free society (Uyo, 2009).

There are many columns in the Nigerian print media. This is a proof that the owners of the different print media organisations in the country understand the immense benefits of the column both to their organisations and the country

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at large. Expectedly, like editorials, commentaries, and letters to the editor, authorship of the column is open to both males and females.

Even so, the number of female columnists and their preferred subjects vis-à-vis the number of male columnists and their preferred subjects has remained a matter of conjecture in Nigerian journalism. However, *Nigerian Columnists and Their Art*, a book-length treatise on columnists and column writing in Nigerian journalism provides a long list of Nigeria's old and contemporary columns. The book, which is edited by Lanre Idowu, editor-in-chief of *Media Review*, was published in 2009 by Diamond Publications Limited. The 250-page book also embodies the analysis of the country's best columnists spanning different generations.

However, while a prominent feature of the book is a comprehensive list of all Nigerian columnists past and present, their newspapers/magazines, and their subjects, the gender of the columnists is not featured. Therefore, this study analyses along gender lines, the content of a section of the book that pertains to the list of columnists. Specifically, the study examines how the number of female columnists compares to that of male columnists and the predominant subjects of female and male columnists. Also, drawing inferences from the agenda-setting and framing theories of the press, the study interrogates the public policy values of the predominant subjects of female columns as well as the extent to which Nigerian female columnists exploit the opportunities the column offers to address public problems.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Journalism is historically male-dominated (Harp *et al.*, 2014). In Nigeria, female journalists recorded the first breakthrough in breaking men's stranglehold on journalism when, following the establishment of the *Daily Times* newspaper, they moved beyond the era of writing only the women's pages to writing features (Ikem, 1996). Women are equally under-represented in U.S. journalism, especially in column writing (Harp *et al.*, 2014).

Sanusi and Adelabu (2015) report that female journalists in Nigeria had made significant progress numerically and impactfully. However, while Harp *et al.* (2014) found that two-fifths of columns written by women in U.S. newspapers were about hard subjects such as economics and politics with most of the studied female columns being overwhelmingly about subjects usually associated with women, including parenting, Sanusi and Adelabu (2015) did not put figures to their findings; they made a list of 25 female journalists, media managers and media owners as evidence that many female journalists had moved beyond merely writing women pages and gossip columns to venturing into mainstream subjects and genres. There is, therefore, the need to address the extant paucity of empirical evidence on the progress of Nigerian female columnists, their predominant subjects, and the potential public policy impact of their preferred subjects.

Therefore, this study is an analysis of a section of *Nigerian Columnists and Their Art* to provide more empirical evidence of women's participation and extent of progress in Nigerian column writing. The study also analyses the subjects of the female columnists to determine the potential impact of the subjects on public policy.

### **Research Questions**

To effectively measure the progress or otherwise of female columnists in number and contributions to important public discourse, the researcher raised the following research questions:

1. How does the number of female columnists compare to that of male columnists?
2. What are the predominant subjects of female & male columnists in Nigeria?
3. Are the predominant subjects of female columnists potential public policy issues?
4. Are female columnists in Nigeria adequately utilizing the opportunities the column offers to advance policy issues that pertain to women's rights and well-being?

### **Literature Review**

This section presents the review of literature relevant to the study. Its main features include an overview of the column, a broad categorisation of the column, some functions of the column, and how the column relates to public policy, public problem, and policy analysis. The section also reviews literature on gender differences in column writing.

#### ***Overview of the Column***

The nature of newspaper and magazine columns makes them difficult to define aptly. Thus, Sheeman (1972: 131) writes that "Columns, in a sense, defy definition because of the multiplicity of types and purposes. There are columns written for businessmen, for sports fans, for women, and for persons interested in travel. Columns are written on international affairs, politics, finance, health, fashions, cooking, and on dozens of other subjects." In fact, columns can be written on every subject imaginable. A column can be about managing money or handling death and dying (Braden, 1997).

Whatever the subject, the column is an important part of media writing. Explaining this, Okunna, Omenugha and Ebeze (2002: 243) posit:

The column is a write-up in form of a feature that reflects the opinion of the writer. It is normally [written] by authorities on particular issues (medical column, humour column, gossip column etc). The column contains the view of an individual on a particular issue affecting the society. Columns are noted for their regularity of publication. Most columns appear regularly in the same position, on the same page of newspaper, under the same by-line.

From the characteristics of the column Okunna *et al.* point out, one can see that first, the column is written by an individual who genuinely has something to say. Secondly, the column is written by individuals who qualify as authorities in their fields of interest. Again, the column is based on issues of public importance. Also, the column is a regular feature in most print media organisations. This, together with the fact of appearing in the same position (Goldberg, 2005), the same page, and under the same byline, underscores its prime place in print journalism. It has, therefore, become a key feature of contemporary newspaper writing and culture (Franklin *et al.*, 2005).

For Ike (2005: 39), a column is “an article that appears regularly, expressing a viewpoint found in newspapers and magazines.” It is pertinent to note that Ike’s definition is by no means an accurate representation of the column. Someone who does not know what a newspaper/magazine column is can hardly recognize one going by Ike’s definition. Also, despite authorship being a critical feature of the column, there is nothing on authorship of the column in the definition. Noel and Allen, cited in White and Andsager (1991), have found that the authorship of a column makes a difference in reader evaluations of . . . credibility. Petley (1997) also notes that popular columnists have been known to provide commercial value for the print media. Similarly, Anibueze (2005: 88), while commenting on the indispensable place of column writing in print journalism, agrees that notable columnists are of commercial value in newspapering: “In every newspaper, there are men and women whose names are the sales pitch.”

Nwosu (2003) provides a more comprehensive explanation of the column when he describes it as a write-up in form of an article, which usually reflects the opinion of the writer. He notes that the column, which is usually boxed, is written by authorities on particular issues, and its important aspect is being the view of an individual on a particular issue or on many issues affecting the society. He adds that a column is noted for its regularity of publication, and “it is often patronised by column loyalists. Columns could be signed or unsigned,” (p. 133). Standing (2007) also comments on the subjective nature of the column when he notes that it often involves a strong personal style, thus requiring a biased perspective from the columnist. Not surprisingly, therefore, Franklin *et al.* (2005: 38) define the column simply as “personal journalism.”

### ***The Column Classified***

Although the column comes in sundry classes, including political, economic, business, sport, gossip, humour or entertainment, health, legal, and so on, Uyo (2009) has its broad categorisation. He categorises the column into two broad classes. One category is based on subject matter and the other is based on style. In the first category are the generalist and specialist columns, and in the second category are the popular and technical columns.

Uyo explains that a column is generalist if it deals with just any subject, which could be political, social, scientific, and so on. A column is specialist if it is restricted to one subject matter. He clarifies that popular columns use a language that is easy to understand to treat their subjects in a way that the general public can understand. Finally, Uyo states that a column is said to be technical if it employs language that only readers versed in the subject matter can understand.

This categorisation is illuminating, especially given that column readers often assume erroneously that all columns are political. An assumption that is not helped by the constant political upheavals in Nigeria. For instance, in an interview, the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila granted Frank Bures, published in *Sunday Vanguard* on April 30, 2003, one of Habila's characters in the novel *Waiting for an Angel* is quoted as saying, "In this country, the very air we breathe is politics." However, Awoyinfa (2009: 18) dispels the belief that all columns are political but points out that although columnists are at liberty to write on any subjects that appeal to them – be it politics, economy, crime, or even relationships, "'hardcore' columnists prefer to comment on issues of the day which have political connotations." Herein lies the reason for the misimpression.

### ***Functions of the Columnist***

It is not for nothing that the column has become a constant feature of most newspapers and magazines. Rather, it is an important feature of print journalism because it provides some important functions to the print media organisations and the wider society.

Prominent among the functions of the column is the provision of a platform for the propagation of viewpoints and ventilation of feelings. The column provides a space in which the different segments of the society – the leaders, the followers, the government, the opposition – meet to debate and evolve complex issues (Uyo, 2009).

As noted earlier, the columnists, especially when they have become popular, have significant commercial value (Petley, 1997), and they have been

known to constitute the sales pitches of newspapers and magazines (Anibueze, 2005) so that some readers actually buy certain newspapers and magazines because of certain columnists. Therefore, columnists help to increase the sales figures of newspapers and magazines.

Columnists, as espoused by Izeze (2009: xi), are also policy makers in their own right as they are the people's representatives who ask the tough questions, demand answers from those in positions of authority, and "canvass new ideas which invariably find their way into public policy."

What is more, columnists, whether they are seasoned journalists or people who are versed in other fields of endeavour, in carrying out their craft, perform the wider traditional journalistic functions of information, education, entertainment, and mobilisation.

### ***The Column and Public Policy***

Izeze (2009) has said that columnists are policy makers functionally, though they are not always addressed as such. That serves to sound off the relationship between column writing and public policy. Kraft and Furlong (2010: 5) quite simply define public policy as "what public officials within government and, by extension, the citizens represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems." From this definition, public policy makers are not always government officials – other citizens of a country can also influence public policy. Therefore, by virtue of the roles columnists perform to the society, they are, among other non-government officials who influence public policy, policy actors.

Uyo (2009: 7) underscores the place of columnists in public policy when he writes: "Now and then, governments announce and execute public policies and programmes which may or may not accomplish their set objectives, or fail to come up with any public policy or programme that addresses the needs and interests of the people." He further notes that when misinformation or unsound reasoning involving public policy occurs, it is the duty of the columnist in any free society to step in and enlighten the society.

Kraft and Furlong (2010: 5) also define public problems as "conditions the public widely perceives to be unacceptable and therefore requiring intervention." They add that these include environmental degradation, threats to workplace safety, or insufficient access to healthcare services. These problems are well within the purview of the column. For instance, it is not uncommon to see an environmental column, a column on workplace safety, or a health column. The variegated nature of the column means that columnists often probe deep into society's needs and anticipate public problems, which they then treat adeptly, sensitising the reading public.

Uyo (2009: 8) also recognises the function of the columnist in identifying, shaping, and proffering solutions to public problems, when he writes:

By exposing shortcomings of various sorts, addressing unsound reasoning and wrongful behaviour, and proffering suggestions or solutions, columns help to give society direction, thereby serving as a social compass and rudder, what some eggheads refer to as the ‘gyroscope function.’

MacRae and Wilde, cited in Kraft and Furlong (2010: 9), explain policy analysis as “the use of reason and evidence to choose the best policy among a number of alternatives.” It entails using many methods of enquiry and draws from various disciplines all geared toward obtaining the needed information to dissect a problem and come up with a well-thought-out alternative resolution.

Public policy analysis is, therefore, the stuff of many columns. Columnists endlessly strive to identify public problems, analyse them, and critique government or public attitude to the problems, often with a view to making the government of the day formulate a policy on the problems or re-formulate an existing policy on the issues. It is little wonder, therefore, that Kraft and Furlong (2009: 5), while observing that public problems can either be addressed by the government or individuals, or a combination of the two, state: “In any given case, the choice depends on how the public defines the problem and on prevailing societal attitudes about private action in relation to government’s role.” Through in-depth analyses, technical perspectives, subtle deployment of language, and access to the print media, columnists help to a large extent in defining public problems and mobilising private actions to government’s role.

### ***Gender Differences in Column Writing***

The field of journalism was dominated by men for centuries with women only starting to venture into the field a few decades ago (Coates, 2004; Harp *et al.*, 2014; Ikem, 1996; Wiik, 2010; van Zoonen, 1998). Several reasons have been adduced for why women have not featured prominently in journalism practice, especially on opinion pages to which the column belongs. Harp *et al.* (2014), for instance, sum up these reasons as gender enculturation, male-dominated culture of newsrooms and women’s unwillingness to take on intensive and time-consuming positions owing to the encumbrances of parenting and other family responsibilities.

Today, women are increasingly breaking free from male dominance in column writing. As Shah (2018: 9) puts it, “This is arguably the best time in the history of the world to be a woman and a writer, because we are aware of the historical ways in which we have been prevented from doing our work . . .

[now] we can write about history, politics, sports and any other traditionally masculine topic we want, using our perspective to make it our own.”

With women’s increasing foray into opinion writing also came research into women’s participation in the subfield. White and Andsager’s (1991) study, for instance, tested the effects of gender on perceived credibility of a newspaper columnist and on subjects’ interest in a newspaper columnist’s writing. Huhtisaari’s (2010) study also examined the differences between column writing by male and female authors. Additionally, Harp *et al.* (2014) undertake a content analysis of women’s representation in the op-ed pages in U.S. newspapers in which they found that female columnists are starting to move beyond topics usually associated with females and are writing on topics traditionally linked to males such as politics and economy. “However, they remain a minority, and, thus, women’s voices have yet to gain more visibility in the world of opinion writing in U.S. journalism,” (p. 289).

Although some of the studies on factors affecting evaluations of male and female writers have focused on the writers’ trustworthiness and style, greater focus has been on the subject matter of the writers (White and Andsager, 1991). This could have been caused by women’s preoccupation, when they eventually started writing columns, with women’s pages (Ikem, 1996) and subjects normally associated with women such as parenting (Harp *et al.*, 2014). The success of the women’s liberation movement has, however, intensified calls for women to go beyond writing on “soft” topics and write more on “hardcore” subjects (see Awoyinfa, 2009: 18 for “soft” and “hardcore” subjects). Shah’s (2019: 8) admonition represents one of such calls: “I am fully a woman when writing, but I am a free woman when I write. Nobody puts a damper on my thoughts and ideas, or my subjects, or my process. Nobody has ever told me, ‘you shouldn’t write about this or that because you’re a woman.’”

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Agenda-Setting cum Framing Theory***

This paper is anchored on the agenda-setting theory of the press whose core is the notion that the mass media pre-determine the issues that the society regards to be prominent and salient. Maxwell Combs and Donald Shaw, both journalism professors, first introduced the agenda-setting theory in 1972. In its earliest phase, the theory did not imply that the press has the power to determine what the society *thinks* but maintained that the press has the power to determine what the society *thinks about* (Cohen, 1963). One of the core assumptions of the theory is that journalists’ concentration on an issue and subject matter makes the public regard the issue as more significant than other issues. In the words of McCombs and Shaw (1994: 4), the “mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda.” The result is that the public sees as crucial what the media deem crucial.

Folarin (1998: 68) shows how journalists set public agenda when he avers that the media are able to shape what the society thinks about through “the quantity or frequency of reporting; prominence given to the reports. . . the degree of conflict generated in the reports; and cumulative media-specific effects over time.” His position is echoed by Kosicki (1993: 113), who explains that media gatekeepers do not, in fact, keep watch over information, moving it around, but they “engage in active construction of the messages, emphasizing certain aspects of an issue and not others.” Griffin (2012: 389) notes that the agenda-setting theory, essentially a media-effect theory, has practical utility in that it tells media agenda setters “not only what to look for, but how they might alter the pictures in the heads of those who read, view, or listen to the news.”

The second phase of the agenda-setting theory is known as agenda building, or more commonly framing theory. Soola (2007: 13) writes that,

the concept of agenda-building suggests that the process of placing an issue on the public agenda not only takes time but also occurs in stages. Also, the manner in which the media frame an issue and the code words used to describe it can impact the issue in public consciousness, by either enhancing its obstructiveness or causing it to slide into unobtrusiveness.

Tankard (1991) explains a media frame as the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context, pointing to what the issue is with the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. Framing, therefore, is an interpretive construct. McCombs, cited in Griffin (2012: 389), defines framing as “the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes for inclusion on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed.” This connotes that the media can also tell the audience how to think. Therefore, when combined, the agenda-setting theory and its offshoot, framing theory, would suggest that the media actually do tell the audience not only what to think about but also how to think, and more: “The media may not only tell us what to think about, they also may tell us how and what to think about it, and perhaps even what to do about it,” McCombs, cited in Griffin (2012: 384).

It, therefore, means that an influential columnist, and many of them are, can effectively influence a public problem by consistently writing about it and conveying its prominence. And this is all with a view to getting the reading public to discuss the column and think about the problem in a certain way (Harcup, 2009).

The nature of the column makes columnists critical agenda-setters, as it is now clear that the column has an agenda-setting function. They are, therefore, key players in the watchdog function of the press (Willis, 2010). Columnists are specialists in the diverse subjects, including topical socio-political and economic subjects, they comment on, albeit critically, on a daily basis. This way, many columnists have carved a niche for themselves; they have become powerful opinion moulders, thus their teeming readers and loyalists (Nwosu, 2003) eagerly look forward to what they (the columnists) have to say on virtually every issue of public importance.

Additionally, columnists are known for their incisive, in-depth treatises of issues that pertain to socio-economic and political realities of any given country. They also enjoy the benefit of serialising their critical commentaries on issues, which enables them to gauge the public's attitudes to the issues and know the best approach to adopt in framing the issues further.

Finally, columnists are versed in the art of interpretation, and framing is an interpretive construct. Therefore, they, in no small measure, succeed in framing issues with requisite aptness and creativity in order to impact on public consciousness, as well as "set the public's political priorities" (Griffin, 2012: 388).

## **Methodology**

The source of data for this paper makes it a content analysis study. Bryman and Bell (2003: 193) define content analysis as "an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner." Thus, the researcher analysed the list of all the columnists in Nigeria in the book *Nigerian Columnists and Their Art*, with a view to identifying the gender of the listed columnists as well as the predominant subjects of the columns.

The number of columnists listed in the book amounted to 610. The columns are spread across 18 newspapers and magazines. The researcher used census study sampling technique, thus all the listed columnists were counted. Coding sheets, guided by a coding manual, were used to collect the needed data from the book. The study's units of analysis are individual columnists, the gender of individual columnists, and the subject matter of the columnists. The content categories are male columnists, female columnists, the indeterminate columnists, and the publications (newspapers and magazines).

The data were presented in frequency tables, which detail, albeit separately, the number of newspapers and magazines in which the columns are found, the number of male, female, and indeterminate columns as well as the percentage of each of the categories.

With column logos that did not have the picture or drawing of the columnist, the researcher made use of the Internet and the different social media platforms to ascertain the gender of the columnists. In a few instances in which

some columnists use pseudonyms, initials, or bear gender-neutral names and their gender could not be ascertained through the Internet, the researcher designated them “indeterminate.” However, these instances were not enough to influence the results of the study.

### ***Data Presentation and Analysis***

Below are the results of the analyses of the data presented in tables and calculated using frequency counts and simple percentages.

**Table 1: Number of columns per newspaper/magazine**

S/N	Publication	No. of Column/Columnist	Percentage (%)
1	Business Day	36	5.9
2	Compass	14	2.2
3	Daily Champion	22	3.6
4	Daily Independent	30	4.9
5	Daily Sun	56	9.1
6	Daily Trust	34	5.5
7	National Life	23	3.7
8	New Nigeria	22	3.6
9	Next	41	6.7
10	Nigerian Tribune	53	8.6
11	Tell	2	0.3
12	The Economy	15	2.4
13	The Guardian	31	5
14	The Nation	78	12.7
15	The News	5	0.8
16	The Punch	43	7
17	This Day	29	4.7
18	Vanguard	76	12.4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>610</b>	≈ 100

Table 1 shows the number of columns in each listed newspaper and magazine. *The Nation* newspaper has 78 columns representing 12.7% of all the listed columns, *Vanguard* newspaper has 76 columns, representing 12.4%, *Daily Sun* has 56 columns or 9.1% and *Nigerian Tribune* has 53 columns or 8.6%.

**Table 2: Subjects distribution of all the columns**

S/N	Subject of Column/Columnist	No. of Subjects	Percentage (%)
1	Agriculture	1	0.1
2	Arts/Screen/Entertainment	40	6.5
3	Aviation	2	0.3
4	Business/Marketing	5	0.8
5	Cartoons	2	0.3
6	Cookery/Food/Nutrition	7	1.1
7	Crime/Security	6	0.9
8	Economy/Money	76	12.4
9	Education	5	0.8
10	Fashion	30	4.9
11	Feminine Issues	2	0.3
12	Health & Fitness	37	6
13	Information Tech./Technology	3	0.4
14	Language/ Linguistics/Literature	14	2.2
15	Law/Business Law	4	0.6
16	Leisure/ Weekend Treat	2	0.3
17	Life/Lifestyle/Domestic Issues	3	0.4
18	Marriage/Relationships/Romance	58	9.5
19	Media	5	0.8
20	Motoring	1	0.1
21	Photography	1	0.1
22	Religion	50	8.1
23	Socio-Political/Nation/Politics/ Development	205	33.6
24	Sports	50	8.1
25	Yoga	1	0.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>610</b>	<b>≈ 100</b>

Table 2 represents the total number of the subjects of Nigerian columnists. A merger of socio-political, politics, development, and “Nation” columns has 205 (33.6%), economy/money has 76 (12.4%), marriage/relationships/romance has 58 (9.5%) and religion and sports each has 50 columns or 8.1% respectively.

**RQ 1: How does the number of female columnists compare to that of male columnists?**

**Table 3: Number of male, female and the indeterminate columns**

S/N	Columns	Number of Columns	Percentage (%)
1	Male Columnists	431	70.6
2	Female Columnists	161	26.3
3	Indeterminate	18	2.9

Table 3 shows the number of male and female columnists. It also shows the “Indeterminate” columns, which are the columns the researcher could not ascertain the gender of their authors. Data show that the number of male columnists (70.6%) is overwhelmingly higher than that of female columnists, which is only 26.3%. Therefore, there are far more male columnists than there are female columnists in Nigeria.

**RQ 2: What are the predominant subjects of female & male columnists in Nigeria?**

**Table 4: Subjects distribution of female columns**

S/N	Subjects	No. of Subjects	(%)	Percentage of all columns (%)
1	Business	3	1.8	0.4
2	Cookery/Food/Nutrition	7	4.3	1.1
3	Economy	18	11.1	2.9
4	Education	3	1.8	0.4
5	Entertainment	6	3.7	0.9
6	Fashion	23	14.2	3.7
7	Feminine Issues	2	1.2	0.3
8	Health	12	7.4	1.9
9	Info. Tech.	1	0.6	0.1
10	Law/Business Law	2	1.2	0.3
11	Life/Lifestyle/Domestic Issues	3	1.8	0.4
12	Literature	9	5.5	1.4
13	Religion	6	3.7	0.9
14	Relationships	40	24.8	6.5
15	Socio-political/Politics	20	12.4	3.2
16	Sports	6	3.7	0.9
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>161 (26.3%)</b>		
		≈ 100		

Table 4 shows the number of each subject considered in the listed female columns. Relationships columns have the highest number at 40 (24.8%) or 6.5% of all the columns; this is followed by fashion, which has 24 (14.2%) or 3.7% of the entire columns. Socio-political/politics columns are 20 (12.4%) or 3.2% of all the studied columns, and economy comes a distant fourth with 18 (11.1%) or 2.9% of the total number of the columns listed in the book. This shows that female columnists still prefer to treat subjects generally considered to be less significant in public discourse such as relationships and fashion while their male counterparts maintain their dominance of vital issues of public importance such as economy and politics.

### **RQ 3: Are the predominant subjects of female columnists potential public policy issues?**

Findings show (See Table 4) that female columnists pay more attention to issues such as fashion and relationships, which are considered soft, and therefore, not serious enough to drive critical public discourse as would economic or socio-political issues (Kraft and Furlong, 2010). Therefore, the predominant subjects of female columnists in Nigeria are not potential public policy issues.

### **RQ 4: Are female columnists in Nigeria adequately utilizing the opportunities the column offers to advance policy issues that pertain to women's rights and well-being?**

Table 1 shows that male columnists (70.6%) are nearly three times the number of women columnists (26.3%). Also, as shown in Table 4, of the 26.3% of women columns, only 11.1% are focused on the economy while 12.4% focus on socio-political issues. Most female columns are about relationships (24.8) and fashion (14.2). This, again, is evidence that female columnists still value issues the wider society views as less critical over the more critical issues most male columnists take on. Female columnists are, therefore, not taking ample advantage of the powers of the column to frame public problems, to set public agenda, and to influence public policy.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This study is an assessment report to ascertain how the number of female columnists compares to that of males after generations of male dominance in Nigerian column writing. Findings show, however, that there are still far more male columnists than female columnists in Nigeria. In fact, the number of male columnists (431 or 70.6%) is almost three times higher than the number of female columnists, which stands at 161 or 26.3%. This is consistent with the result of a similar study conducted in the U.S. by Harp *et al.* (2014), which

showed that there were only 6 female columnists out of the 22 columnists they studied.

Izeze (2009) has submitted that columnists are the representatives of the people, but the number of female columnists in Nigeria is nowhere comparable to the teeming women population of the country. Consequently, while it will be easy for male columnists, acting as a group, to push public issues to the attention of policy makers, the same cannot be said of female columnists. Also, should female columnists try to advance any issues their male counterparts consider unfavourable, it will be easy for the male columnists to discredit the issues. Therefore, when it comes to column writing in Nigeria, as it is in the U.S., the men still hold the ace: it is still the men's world.

An analysis of the subjects of the female columns also shows that female columnists pay more attention to relationship issues (24.8%) and fashion (14.2%) than socio-political issues (12.4%), issues of the economy (11.1%), and even feminine issues (1.2%). Even though the percentage of female columnists who focus on subjects such as socio-political and economic issues is still low compared to that of male columnists, it is some progress, especially considering the days when female journalists only wrote women's pages and few feature stories (Ikem, 1996). It also marks a departure from the era when women journalists were criticised for only "concentrating on soft sides of journalism such as women stories, family affairs and gossips" (Sanusi and Adelabu, 2015: 5). However, much as women have started writing about more important societal issues such as economics and politics, they are yet to significantly impact these genres numerically.

Uyo (2009) has underscored the power of columnists to expose shortcomings, address irrationalities, give society a direction and generally serve as a social compass through which truth is told to power in order to make the government responsive and accountable. However, given that they still predominantly concentrate on rather trivial issues, female columnists can scarcely perform these immense watchdog functions (Willis, 2010). This suggests that female columnists will still be relying heavily on their male counterparts to drive important issues pertaining to women's rights and well-being to government consciousness.

According to Kraft and Furlong (2010: 6), public policies are about serious socio-political realities such as auto fuel efficiency standards, greenhouse gases, U.S. dependence on imported oil, recognition of a woman's right to abortion, and promotion of the rights of the fetus whose resulting policies affect the lives of a great number of people. Subjects such as relationships and fashion are, therefore, hardly the topics of public policy. Therefore, women do not take full advantage of the immense advantages of the column to influence public policy, to empower the civil society and to engender a free society (Uyo, 2009).

Women columnists appear to still be blind to the immense functions of the column, which Izeze (2009) aptly enunciated. These functions include serving as the society's consciousness and driving innovative ideas that often form public policy.

What is more, realizing the enormous powers of the column, especially in conferring the status of policy makers to columnists, and sufficiently utilizing same could have even helped Nigerian female columnists to effectively break men's stranglehold on column writing and achieve gender balance in newsrooms. They could have done so by consistently presenting gender imbalance in newsrooms (see, for instance, Harp *et al.*, 2014) as a public problem, then launch a sustained campaign against it through their columns. But they do not only lack the number to do this, but also do not take on the subjects that can effectively push for this. Therefore, the huge opportunities the hardcore columns (Awoyinka, 2009) offer in this regard still elude them.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study compares the number of female columnists to that of male columnists in Nigeria. It is aimed at ascertaining whether the female columnists as potential policy actors are taking full advantage of the opportunities the newspaper/magazine column offers in order to influence public agenda. The paper also analyses the predominant subjects of the female columnists to see if the subjects of their columns potentially impact on the various agenda-setting and watchdog functions of the columnists.

Findings show that the number of male columnists is still far higher than that of female columnists. Also, most female columnists still prefer writing about less critical issues. However, to influence public discourse in Nigeria through the columns, more females should write columns, and when they do, they should give priority to tough issues like politics and economy as these are the domains in which tough questions channeled toward direct policy makers are asked.

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